



**House International Relations — Subcommittee on Africa,
Global Human Rights and International Operations
Christopher H. Smith (R-NJ) Chairman**

Subcommittee Hearing

"The Endangered Children of Northern Uganda"

Testimony of

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Introduction

Good afternoon. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for this opportunity to speak on behalf of the endangered children of northern Uganda.

I am speaking on behalf of World Vision, a Christian relief and development organization that provides on-the-ground assistance to children and families in need, regardless of who they are. For the past 55 years, World Vision has been serving children and families throughout the world. In Uganda, WV has been serving since 1986 with a broad range of assistance including meeting emergency needs; offering direct HIV/AIDS care and prevention education; and leading long-term poverty alleviation efforts in the areas of agriculture, economic development; water and sanitation; care for Orphans and Vulnerable children, and more.

In northern Uganda, where I was born and raised, for over 10 years World Vision has been working to serve through a broad range of interventions, but in particular, they have had a very important ministry to young people like myself. For the past 11 years World Vision staff has counseled, rehabilitated and reconciled more than 15,000 formerly abducted child soldiers, with their families and communities.

Since 1986, a rebel group called the Lord's Resistance Army, or "LRA", led by Joseph Kony, has waged war against the current Ugandan government, and against us, the children of northern

Uganda. Kony has abducted more than 30,000 children, forcing them to serve as soldiers and “forced concubines” within their ranks.

I was once one of those children. But by God’s grace I am alive and with you today.

My Story

In October 1996, the LRA attacked St. Mary’s College, a girls' boarding school in Aboke Town, in the Apac District, in northern Uganda. They abducted 139 girls--including myself. I was 15 years old at the time.

One of the nuns who ran the school, Sister Rachelle Fassera, followed the rebels into the bush, pleading for our release. The rebels released 109 of my classmates, but the LRA refused to let me go. I was forced to stay, along with 29 others.

I was forcibly marched into southern Sudan. We walked 4 days and 4 nights. There, the LRA had bases that were run and protected by forces allied with the Sudanese government in Khartoum.

I, and the other girls captured with me were trained to assemble and disassemble, clean and use guns. We were used as slave labor by the LRA and Sudanese government soldiers. We were forcibly given to senior LRA commanders as so-called “wives”.

For seven months, I was held in captivity by the LRA, always looking for an opportunity to escape. I constantly prayed that God would allow me to see my family once more before I died. I desperately wanted to finish my education. But hope seemed distant. I saw two other children who had tried, unsuccessfully, to escape. They were brutally murdered in front of me as a warning.

One night, we were forced to raid a village, and I was directed to help steal food and water. I fainted from thirst. I woke up hours later, buried alive in a shallow grave. The Ugandan soldiers, along with the SPLA (Sudan People's Liberation Army) attacked the base of the LRA, allowing me a chance to escape.

I walked for three days, living on soil and leaves before I found another group of children who had also escaped. I persuaded eight of them to join me, and we eventually found a group of villagers who took care of us, before helping us connect with the Ugandan army to return home.

I escaped, alive from the LRA, but five of my classmates died in captivity. The others gradually managed to escape over the past ten years; some are infected with HIV/AIDS; many of them have children by the commanders who abused them. Ten years later, two of my friends are still held hostage by the LRA.

So I thank God for allowing me to see my family again. I thank Him for allowing me to continue on with my education. I went back to St. Mary's to finish high school, and then I began studying at Uganda Christian University, in southern Uganda near the capital city, Kampala. I have since transferred to Gordon College in Boston, where I am now working on my undergraduate degree in Communications. When I finish my education I would like to work for one year, and then continue on to graduate school to study International Relations and Conflict Resolution. I want to be part of the people struggling day and night to try to bring peace in the world.

Night Commuters

Unfortunately, my story is not uncommon. In fact, it has become so common that abduction is now a fear which daily defines the lives of children who live in the war-affected areas. Because there is no protection for children in northern Uganda, they have created their own way to cope. Thousands of children walk each evening, by themselves, to towns, as far as 10 miles away, to find safety from the LRA. They sleep on the streets of town centers and in makeshift camps. These children are now known as "night commuters". Recently, there has been a decline in the number of attacks by the LRA, so the number of night commuters has been reduced. But just as the LRA kidnapped me in the middle of the night, they usually abduct children under the cover of darkness. Because of this, most children in northern Uganda are now afraid to sleep in their own beds at night.

Ending the War

This war continues because the world ignores our plight. But this war can stop if leaders in the international community take real action to end this crisis. By action, I specifically mean three things:

1. High-level Engagement by the US Government. Members of Congress, the Administration, and international leaders must use their political influence to pressure the Government of Sudan to stop supporting the LRA. The US must also use high-level influence to pressure the Ugandan government to end the war.

Remember, more than eighty (80%) of the LRA is comprised of abducted children-young people, like myself, who were stolen in the middle of the night.

2. US leadership in mobilizing the international community, to put global pressure on combatants to protect children and to end the conflict.
3. Provide more resources to help people suffering because of this conflict.

Although the number of rebel attacks has decreased in some areas, many of my family and friends are still living in squalid displacement camps. Those who remain in the IDPs camps continue to need significant humanitarian assistance.

In some areas, people have begun to return to their villages, but continued protection and security against the LRA who are still at-large is critical. It will also be important for the Government of Uganda and the international community to provide returnees with adequate resettlement assistance and support in restoring and developing community infrastructure, so that people can begin to rebuild their lives.

We also need support for more psycho-social programs that help all children living in northern Uganda, because all children in the region have been traumatized by this war: whether they have been abducted; or watched their brother, or sister, or classmate being abducted; or they are a “night commuter” and live in fear of abduction.

If these things are done, I believe the war will end. It can end tomorrow if the world comes together to do these things. Mr. Chairman, I ask for your help and the help of others to take action to end this war, so that my sisters and brothers and all the children of northern Uganda can sleep in peace.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.